THANKSGIVING
Deuteronomy 26:1-11
I Thessalonians 5:16-18

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Two magazine covers set me to thinking recently: the November issue of A.D. showed the door of a church on which had been placed a basket of corn and a decorative ribbon bearing the words "THANK YOU". The most recent issue of Newsweek, on the other hand, adorned its cover with a cornocopia, empty except for an icycle: Uncle Sam is looking forlonly at this sight and the caption reads: "RUNNING OUT OF EVERYTHING."

A.D. had the following to say about its cover: "Since a harvest of corn in 1621, got red and white Americans together for the first time, Thanksgiving has grown into a display and feast of the fruits of the land. We have come from 102 British exiles (Half of whom died during the first winter) and a few hundred friendly Indians to a federation of more than 200,000,000 citizens of every color, tongue and faith. We have spread from near starvation to fatness, from a few men arching arrows in a Massachusetts field to a few men arching footballs for millions of armchair spectators. Too often we forget to say, 'Thank you' not for our growth in size and goods, but for the good land from which we live and to the good God from whom the bounty flows." Too often we do forget. One of most imp. parts of summer was the exp. of coming back. I grew up in Pa. - but never saw the mountains : been driving thru Ind. for 13 yrs. - and never saw the miles of corn before

Newsweek commented on its cover by identify ing the sullen mood of the nation as it slowly comes to grips with the fact and prospect of shortages. The fact is that most Americans have known nothing except economic growth, confidence and abundance. The majority of Americans are well under 35 years of age. That means they know the depression only as history. Even the rationing during World War II is just a story out of the past. Married in the late 50's and 60's they have come of age in the greatest period of sustained economic growth in the history of the world. And so the cornocopia looks empty and the mood is sullen, because most of us have never had to deal with shortages of anykind. ~~and if worse comes to worse we may have to regress economically to a point still well above everybody else in the world.~~ What do you do on Thanksgiving when, in Newsweeks' words, we're running out of everything?

~~In addition~~ The giving of thanks to God in the autumn of the year is ~~tied~~ - and has always been part of an agricultural mentality. And that just doesn't pertain to many Americans today - or to many people here for that matter. Fifty ye ars ago Reinhold Niebuhr, perhaps the greatest theologian this country has ever produced was a pastor in Detroit. In his diary he wrote, "I wonder if it is really possib e to have an honest Thanksgiving Celebration in an industrial

civilization. Harvest festivals were natural enough in peasant communities. The agrarian feels himself dependent upon nature's beneficence and anxious about nature's caprice's. When the autumnal harvest is finally safe in the barns there arise, with the sigh of relief, natural emotions of gratitude that must express themselves religiously, ~~since the bounty is actually created by the mysterious forces of nature which man may guide but never quite control.~~

All that is different in an industrial civilization in which so much wealth is piled up by the ingenuity of the machine, and, at least seemingly, by the diligence of man. Thanksgiving becomes increasingly the business of congratulating the Almighty upon his most excellent co-workers, ourselves." (~~Leaves from the Notebook of a Tamed Cynic~~)

He was right. The harvest may or may not be in - most of us don't really know. Our forefathers may have heaved great sighs of relief when the barns were full for the winter. You and I simply assume that they are, and our closest contact with the process by which they get full begins and ends at the supermarket cash register.

How to celebrate Thanksgiving then, when we haven't even worried about the success of the crops: when we have been weaned on a confidence in ever increasing economic growth: when our mood is sullen and depressed about our future? I'd suggest that we take a pilgrimage through the past to rediscover those basic religious emotions all men have felt as the harvest was gathered: that we stop along the way to look again at how those remarkable Englishmen celebrated and why they did and how they passed on to succeeding generations a rather supecial and unique religious sensitivity: and finally that we put it all in the context of our faith - a faith which holds up gratitude as the duty of mankind in all seasons.

Let's go back - to the earliest times - to the Euphrates valley and the tribes of semitic people who began it all. They were not very sophicated intellectually, but they knew that there was something essentially different between life and non-life: between a worm and a rock. They knew that if you put a ~~XXXX~~ rock in the ground nothing happened, but a seed would grow. They knew that there was life around them and in them - and religious sensitivity was awakened as they attributed that mysterious life force to a being beyond themselves.

In any case they deduced that life belonged to the Deity - he owned it all: to claim or

to use a living thing was to violate the rights of the diety. And so partly in reverence but mostly ~~and partly~~ in fear they devised a way of ceremonially giving thanks and at the same time claiming for their use - growing, living things. The first and best part of the harvest - or the flock was sacrificed - offered up to the deity - given back to its rightful owner. For some,,the first born too was offered

These elemental religious sentiments and practices were assumed by Israel. The Feast of Weeks - including the offering of First Fruits in described in detail in the Old Testament. At the beginning of the harvest. The first shock, or ~~warm~~ wave, of barley was brought to the Temple: It was illegal for harvesting to commence until this offering was made. Then, seven weeks later, at the conclusion of the harvest, the Feast was held. All work ceased: two ~~loaves~~ loaves of bread and two lambs were brought to the Temple. All the males present danced an "altar dance" singing the Hallel, Psalms 113-118. God was thanked for the success of the crops. Then came the feast, a communal meal to which were invited the poor and the traveler. After all of that First Fruits were offered, and it seems to have been an individual matter. When the cereal or animal was brought to the priest the worshipper recited a moving confession of faith that described God's mighty act of delivering his people from slavery.

Notice how the Jews changed and expanded the pagan custom. In the first place, the welfare of the needy was made a part of giving thanks to God. The ancient law carefully stipulates that the poor are to be invited to the feast. In the second place, God is given thanks, in the offering of First Fruits, not for the success of the harvest - but for being God: for being the power that freed the people from Egyptian oppression and that led them into the land. The emphasis is on him - what he did.

That's where it begins, and yet for centuries this second idea - the giving of praise and thanks to God for being God - has never been as prominent as the celebration of God's bounty in nature. Harv. celebrations have been observed since the begin. of recorded history: in the ~~Harvest Home festivals were characteristic of the~~ middle ages - lusty, rollicking celebrations involving food and ale and sport. In fact they were so popular in England and exhuberant that Henry VIII had to pass a law stipulating that could not begin until the harvest was complete. Seems that some wanted to play before the work was done

Not until the Pilgrims, on the rocky shores of New England, in the year 1621, were the two ideas brought back together - God the giver of life and food - and God who calls his

pilgrim people to a new land, who abides with them, who will be in their future, and who provides something more necessary than food and drink, namely himself.

After all, the Pilgrim Fathers, did their celebrating in the midst of what was a near - disaster. Half of them were dead: all but three families had lost someone: the barley they planted had done very poorly: the peas had failed altogether: it was the corn - given to them by the Indians which made life possible - enough to provide two pounds of ground meal per person per day for the winter. And so it was something less than a celebration of nature's kindness - because nature had not been kind. Or better said, it was something more: it was a celebration of God's presence - the power that gave them strength; the hand they felt leading them into the unknown - the assurance that no matter what happened he would not abandon them in the future.

That's what's special about an American Thanksgiving, even though we have forgotten it. God is to be thanked for things to be sure; for food and clothing and shelter and comfort. But mostly he is to be thanked for being God and for being with us. To the early Christian Church in Thessalonica St. Paul wrote: "...give thanks in all circumstances: for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you." Goodspeed translates it even more plainly: "Thank God whatever happens. For this is what God in Jesus Christ wants you to do."

That is what the Pilgrims were able to do. And that is precisely what makes Thanksgiving, rightly undertood, radically different from Harvest Festivals down through history. Of course we are grateful to God for the food on the table - for health and well being - for children and loved ones. Robert Louis Stevenson noted one time that "The man who has forgotten to be thankful has fallen asleep in life." Of course we are grateful for the beneficence of the natural world. But it goes deeper than that for us. The first American Thanksgiving was celebrated in the midst of adversity, not abundance. And I always like to remember that Thanksgiving was first proclaimed a National Holiday by Abraham Lincoln. At that moment in time Lincoln was heart-broken. His young and beloved son had recently died: his wife was obviously neurotic, villified by the press and society: and the nation was split right down the middle in a bloody civil war. In his message to the nation Lincoln called all Americans to give thanks to God for his bountiful goodness. What goodness - when you son is dead, your wife sick and the whole world falling apart?

The whole trouble with Harvest Festivals, you see, is that sometimes the harvest fails. The whole trouble with building a celebration on full larders, or good health or prosperous families is that sometimes the larder is empty, health is failing or your son just got fired. And the enigma of Thanksgiving 1973, is that there isn't enough fuel, and that perhaps we are in for a major adjustment in our definition of the good life, and that perhaps we have reached the outer limit of abundance - which is the stock phrase of the economists.

→ "Thank God whatever happens." It is just now - that the Christian digs in. It is just now that the Christian remembers the words "nothing in all creation shall separate us from the loe of God in Jesus Christ our Lord." And beyond that, a lonely man, on his way to die, breaking bread with his friends and giving thanks.

Illust. (from Mrs. Fosdick's letter)

Countless times people have told me that their deepest experience of gratitude came at a time of difficulty. At the death of a loved one we find ourselves grateful for the love and support of friends: in sickness - in the hospital - it is a nearly universal experience to look around and give thanks for the degree of health one has.

Thanksgiving is an opportunity for all ofus to do some quiet accounting: to take stock of our lives and all that we have been given: to give profound thanks for the people who love us - who support us, who make life worthwhile. It is an opportunity to take quiet stock of what it means to be alive in 1973. But most of all, it is an opportunity ot thank the God who has ~~loved~~ loved us into life who has walked with us in the past, and whose firmest promise is that he will be with us in the future.

So let us raise our song of Harvest Home

"with heart and hand and voices

~~Who wondrous things hath done~~

O may this bounteous God

Through all our life be near us,

with ever joyful hearts

And blessed peace to cheer us. AMEN

Father, hear our words of Thanksgiving. And this week as we sit at table with our families, make us newly sensitive to your presence: through Jesus Christ our Lord. AMEN